

# REVIEWS

## Kay Armatage's Storytelling

Toronto filmmaker Kay Armatage's latest film, *Storytelling*, is a tale constructed by the marriage of seven short myths.

This year's Canadian Images Festival program described *Storytelling* as an "award-winning film" which "features performances by master storytellers telling tales which together outline the trajectory of a lifespan, from creation, birth, heroic adulthood, to death and regeneration." The program notes that "The stories are intercut to effect an almost Proppian analysis of narrative and to suggest an alternative position for women as producers and heroes of culture."

As Armatage herself comments on the film's intention: "I wanted the stories to not only construct to tell the story of a lifespan, but to include a number of categories in the folkloric cycle. I also wanted a story that would provide a critique of stories themselves."

Implicit in the film's structure is a deconstruction of traditional narrative forms and mythic folklore. The film disassembles the short stories and carefully reassembles them into one tale which reiterates their individual messages. However, because the editing from one story to the next is largely determined by the storyteller's own rhythms, the focus of the film is on the telling of the tales, not on the critique of narrative form. Thus it becomes an exercise on continuity editing, visual pleasure and good performance.

British theorist and filmmaker Peter Wollen, attending Canadian Images, said he "was very interested in *Storytelling* because it uses so many kinds of styles. It's more about styles of storytelling, than stories in themselves. Most of the storytellers in that film would tell the same story in totally different ways, so the focus of the film is more on the telling than on the tale. The way she cut it emphasized different tellings as well."

The fluid movement established in *Storytelling* is undermined only at the very end of the film. Armatage regards the film as "an emotional journey that the audiences goes through by their own delight and emotional involvement, and the critique comes in at the end." This 'critique' - a break in the pacing which denies the audience the expected ending of a story (as well as the film) -

serves only to frustrate an otherwise flawless flow of well-timed cuts.

"There is an emotional trajectory which finishes (when a street rapper, Grand Master Caz, is winding down) but then the movie isn't over. It has the shape of a story whose ending is not the end," says Armatage. But this idea of narrative criticism is introduced too late in the film for the point to be made clearly, if at all. The ending essentially breaks the established form, making for a loosely constructed conclusion.

Throughout the film, camera movement is minimalist, save for a few simple tracking shots. Armatage emphasizes the need for this specific lack of movement: "I wanted the storyteller to speak directly to the film audience. There's only one way of doing that if you want to maintain eye contact: you don't have the camera moving around. All the storytellers practice their art by either standing or sitting down. They don't range around a stage. It's not the type of performance which involves action. They concentrate on the voice, the face, and on the words. So you can't have them searching around for a tracking camera that's doing its own little arabesques around them. And I didn't want the cinema technology to mediate between the storyteller and the audience. I wanted it to be a clear, direct relation."

Armatage utilized this same one-on-one, performer-to-audience formula in her earlier film *Striptease*. With both movies she acknowledges the intended use of voyeuristic pleasure, purposely excluding the third person (audience) to achieve a direct spectator/spectated arena. In practice, the films read like traditional documentaries where film is regarded as truth. They avoid any analysis of voyeurism whatsoever.

The subject matter of *Striptease*, combined with a voyeuristic viewpoint, launches it into another realm of criticism entirely. The content of *Storytelling* is better suited to a motionless gaping camera: the storytellers use the boundaries of the frame to their advantage, and create movement through imagination as well as story content. When cutting from one story to the next, Armatage considers this movement within the stories, mixing them so that they effortlessly overlap.

"We edited on journeys or movements through space (in one story someone goes down in the water, which cuts to a story where someone comes up in the water). Yes, there is a very clear movement in the film that is around transformation. There are four transformations in a row. The shadow puppets drink the

magic potion and the woman comes back as a flying leopard, and the man comes back as a prince or a devil. In another story the skeleton woman is transformed (a young woman licks this old woman clean or her wounds when they are at the bottom of the river). There are changes of season. In one story they're talking about winter turning to spring; spring turning to summer. In another story they're talking about a passage of time. They are all intercut." Like a well-crafted puzzle, the images do create a fairy tale.

Armatage specifically selected the background imagery and settings to further emphasize the traditions of narrative: "They're a narrative for the stories themselves. In the shot of Laura Simms in Central Park, to the left of the screen behind her is a sort of fairy tale castle and on the right behind her is a Turkish pavilion. And Grand Master Caz (the rapper) is shot in front of a wall of graffiti. Constance de Jong (telling a fairy tale) is shot in front of a video pyramid because I wanted her to be completely surrounded by televisions to suggest that the contemporary technology doesn't have to clash with the oral tradition. In fact, there is some kind of alliance between the narrative tradition and television." However, she doesn't go

on to define what 'in fact' that alliance is.

In the final analysis, the traditional format employed in *Storytelling* is like a skeleton draped with carefully selected details which do not disturb the precious narrative structure. Yet it works, making the film a story worth telling again.

Suzan Ayscough ●

**STORYTELLING** p.c. Atlantis Films Ltd./ Kay Armatage co-production d. Kay Armatage p. Seaton McLean ed. Margaret Van Eerdijck cam. Mark Irwin, c.s.c., Steve Fierberg set des. Sandy Kybartas sd. mixer Aerlyn Weissman cam. asst. Robin Miller gaffer John Herzog grip David Zimmerman loc. scout Peter Mettler res. Maureen Harris p. asst.'s Paul McGloshlan, Tom Reid stills Christopher Lowry titles Meta Media. Made with the assistance of The Canada Council. **Special Thanks To:** Northrop Frye, Dan Yashinsky, Joan Bodger, Barry Dickson, Allan Dickson, Norissa Chrichlow, Ruth Hill, Steve Jenkinson, Jerry Dee Lewis, Helen Porter, Charlie Ahearn, The Whitney Museum of Modern Art, Video Pyramid by Nam Jun Paik. **Stories told by:** Gioia Timpenali ("Eury-nome," "The Magic Drum"); Brother Blue ("Caterpillar and Butterfly," "Once I Had A Brother"); Laura Simms ("The Necklace"); Ron Evans ("The Story Of Marie D'Orion"); Alice Kane ("Why The Chaffinch Watches The High Road"); Grand Master Caz (of the Cold Crush Four) ("Rapperville"); Constance de Jong ("I.T.L.O.E."); **Shadow puppets by:** Hank Bull **String figures by:** Ken McCuaig **Dist.** Atlantis Television Int. Inc. **running time** 55 min. **colour** 16mm.

## MINI REVIEWS



● The elusive John Kim Bell conducting

Mini Reviews in this issue catch up on two independently-produced 16mm films made in 1983, and available from two sources.

### JOHN KIM BELL

A "cinematic portrait" of John Kim Bell, a young conductor of symphony orchestras, of Broadway shows, and for ballet companies, who also happens to have been born on the Caughnawaga Indian reserve near Montreal.

Bell began as a piano prodigy, progressing to a promising concert pianist, but eventually becoming interested in "show" conducting. In the 1980-81 season, he was appointed apprentice conductor with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra under Maestro Andrew Davis, making his debut in May 1981 with that orchestra. Bell's varied career now includes

guest conducting a number of orchestras on the North American continent, and continuing to conduct Broadway hits such as *A Chorus Line* and *On Your Toes*, along with assignments for the Eglevsky Ballet Company and the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

A lively opening to the film sparks immediate interest. Andrew Davis stands in the wings swapping quips with Bell, who's about to go out and conduct. However, from this high there develops a curiously lethargic pace, and Bell seems rehearsed and ill-at-ease with the camera focussed upon him. Sequences devoted to him conducting, in rehearsal and performance, seem endless and, since a 37-minute film is difficult to program, some judicious pruning of these areas could bring it to a TV half-hour.

But, ultimately, this is a disappointing film. There's the nagging feeling

● Yes, there is narrative after television as Constance de Jong demonstrates in *Storytelling*



photo: Aerlyn Weissman



by Kevin Tierney

# Carry on, CBC

that underneath the John Kim Bell up there on the screen lurks an unexplored depth of memory, background and ambition. It's a great pity that there's such a lot of conducting and so little insight into this witty, charming, but finally elusive personality.

p./d. Anthony Azzopardi ed. Murray Battle cam. Rene Ohashi **Colour**, running time: 37 mins. p.c. Cineroutes Productions in co-operation with The Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts. **dist./sales** Cineroutes Productions, 72 Hubbard Blvd., Toronto M4E 1A5.

### FROM GRAPE TO GLASS

A right, tight little look at the fairly young, but definitely upcoming, Chateau des Charmes Winery in Ontario. From the word that the grape is ready to pick, the film swings into the harvesting, the grafting process, the stringing of new vines in the fields. Then to the really interesting bits – the reds fermenting and being tested for readiness, the bottling, and the popping in of corks soon to be popped out by eager guzzlers.

An economical, serviceable film, well-photographed, and where all processes are clearly seen and only talked about in a few terse sentences of commentary – what a nice change!

d./ed. Bruce Griffin cam. Jim Aquila **Colour**, running time: 10 mins. **dist./sales**: Film Arts Ltd. 461 Church St., Toronto M4Y 2C5.

*The Academy of Canadian Cinema and The Canada Council announced last month the winners of the 3rd Annual Canadian Independent Film Showcase. Out of 43 submissions, the lucky five chosen got \$3,000 apiece. Blown up to 35mm, each print will receive national theatrical distribution with a major release, through the co-operation of the Canadian Motion Picture Distributors' Association.*

### ACTING OUT

We're at the Comic Strip Theatre and the master-of-ceremonies is a duck who has difficulty with his quacks – which pop out unexpectedly during his announcements. Four little acts are paraded – interview with an actor, an impersonation of a horse, a very unusual puppet show and, finally, A Word From Our Sponsor.

Each tiny 'sketch' has a punch-line, the animation is delightful, and Vancouver's Al Sens strikes and scores again!

A film by Al Sens (Vancouver). Animated. **Colour**, 6:07 mins. **dist.**: To be announced.

### TALEWIND

The forest gleams in the sunlight, and a leaf begins its floating journey to the ground. But, caught in an animated breeze, it takes a flight of fancy – past the CN Tower in Toronto, across the continent and the world, past camels, palms, icebergs – until back in the forest it falls to earth. A pleasant, restful little trifle.

A film by Greg Gibbons (Sheridan College/Toronto). Animated. **Colour**, 3:50 mins. **dist.**: Twentieth Century-Fox.

### CHARADE

A voice-over explains the charade game, and other voices *think* they can play – but they don't seem too bright. An animated mime-master furiously acts out a movie/book and the players reel off streams of titles, but none are correct. Then the cool mime appears, and with one gesture conveys all. The voices (all done by the filmmaker) are deliciously soppy, as is the insane choice of film titles. A slightly sophisticated, well-executed joke, with a great ending.

A film by Jon Minnis (Sheridan College/Toronto). Animated. **Colour**, 4:32 mins. **dist.**: Columbia Pictures of Canada (English version) Cine 360 Inc. (French version).

### I THINK OF YOU OFTEN

Over newsreel footage of WWI volunteers marching off, a voice asks: "How is everything in Orillia?". And so the letters of a soldier to Suzanne, his girl back home, unfold over the grinding endlessness of war at the front. Even though Suzanne's letters are "a source of energy", the young soldier struggles with disillusion as he realizes he may be "dying for a war that makes no sense."

A film of intimate charm and delicacy, which never tips over into sentimentality.

d./sc. Scott Barrie (Toronto). B&W. 9:45 mins. **lp.** Wayne Best (The Soldier) (Assistance from Ontario Arts Council/The Canada Council) **dist.**: TBA.

### THE STORY

He talks about his friend, Thomas Harkness, a writer of short stories who lived in an ordered world with no dissenting views. Harkness courted solitude and spent the greater part of the year on an isolated island. He catches a fleeting glimpse of a girl on the ferry. She leaves her valise. In it the writer finds a journal describing his island and his house... he stops writing.

Shot in 35mm, this flaccid, empty exercise has delusions of grandeur and, even though it looks good, it's definitely not enough.

A film by Lorne Wolk & David Willetts (Toronto). **Colour**, 10 mins. (Assistance from Ontario Arts Council/The Canada Council) **dist.**: TBA.

*Charade* is already in release with *Moscow On The Hudson*. However, of the remaining four, only *Talewind* has a distributor. An announcement has yet to be made as to any other pairings with first-run features.

It's great to encourage independent short films and their makers with commercial bookings, but programming with the right feature is crucial in order that the short can be enhanced and fully appreciated. It's no good putting the delicate *I Think Of You Often* with a *Porky's*-type movie...

The jury for Showcase included Maurice Attias, Leonard Bernstein, Hannah Fisher, Christopher Gallagher, Ted Hulse, Claude Jutra, Micheline Lanctôt, Michael Mills and Ralph L. Thomot.

Pat Thompson ●

I can still remember the coming of CBC-TV, vague though it may be. The second major breakthrough was the coming of the other network. For years afterward Montrealers lived along and with the '6 and 12 paradigm' (CBC and CTV respectively). In those days TV sets had only 13 numbers and the world seemed simpler because of it.

Soon there was talk of UHF and VHF. With such harsh sounding initials, you knew anyone who dared introduce them into the language had other sorts of wizardry ready to unleash on us all. And they did. Ever since I first caught a glimpse of the button that would take us all the way to 99, I knew it was only a matter of time (and that was before even Peter Gzowski had heard of Wayne Gretzky).

Because television in Canada has begun to resemble a national board game. How long will it be before we know whether that game is high-rollers' Monopoly or only another all-new edition of Trivial Pursuit? TVEC and Premier Choix merge but nobody calls it Deuxième Choix. The Maritimes' Star Channel wants to breathe again and be pointed west into Quebec. Meanwhile, Ontario Superchannel wants to blow east, also into Quebec. And to stop so many francophones from watching *The Price Is Right* on English television every day, Fox and friends announce plans to bring on a second private francophone television network to go with TVA, which would give the province a total of four networks.

You want sports? We're getting sports, maybe even more sports than anyone ever wanted to see.

You want sex and violence? Okay, you want more sex and violence? We'll be getting more rock videos. Imagine an entire network devoted to demonstrating the banality of your average rock'n'roll lyric.

So it's a pity in all this deluge of private television for the eyeballs, just as the feds are getting ready to do in the National Film Board as we know it, that such a lot of really healthy activity is being generated through the good old public sector, activity that for a change we actually get to see. As those who stay home on Sunday nights and switch their dials (convert their converters?) to the CBC can attest.

A recent episode of the CBC series, *For The Record*, called *A Change of Heart* was one such example of the direct benefits of CBC-NFB cooperation. Produced by the NFB's Northwest Studio in Edmonton, this lovely little film put to good use the com-

bined talents of two exceptionally talented documentary filmmakers, Tom Radford, executive producer, and Anne Wheeler, director. At one hour (it could easily have been another half but wasn't because everything about it said stay small and check your ambitions) *Change of Heart* was a lesson in what TV can be when it isn't pretending to be what it isn't: small and ugly. Small and ugly the way all our lives are small and the way we all have our ugly moments. Just as we all have our not so ugly ones, and just as this movie did.

On the big screen we're blown up, as are our moments, blown up to something larger than life. We're almost forced to look better than we do, to be stronger or weaker than we are. In *A Change of Heart* people are taken for what they are – not larger than life, nor as sociological issue-oriented stereotypes which have too often plagued other episodes of this series.

It's not that everyone in Canadian TV has to be ugly. The point is they don't have to be beautiful – naturally or cinematographically.

Meanwhile, in further signs of healthy cooperation between private and public sectors, on Academy Award night the CBC gets a thank-you from Oscar-winner Atlantis Films, the same energetic Toronto production house who've gotten the Montreal NFB people active transposing a smaller Richler onto the screen. If Sundays nights in Canada are looking better, should we begin to hope for more than just one night a week?

In the same week as *A Change of Heart* played on CBC, the announcement came that the moving and musical documentary, *La Turlute des années dures*, had won the Quebec Critics' Association Molson-Quimet prize for the best feature, fiction or documentary, released in Quebec in 1983. Its directors, Pascal Gélinas and Richard Boutet, get a \$5,000 prize and Quebec television viewers get to see the film on the provincially-owned, public sector Radio-Quebec.

Both these films have much to say to us about what we are, yet neither of these will likely ever show up on the other's public television. How different would life be if granting agencies insisted on the sub-titling of all film and video projects funded by them?

Imagine *A Change of Heart* in La Beauce. Or *La Turlute* in Saskatoon. Now that would be a national broadcast fund of a decidedly different order.